



# “The Purpose of Parables”

Text: Matthew 13:1-23, 44-53

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I wonder which one of the disciples it was. I wonder which one actually asked the question. My money is on Peter. If it wasn't Peter, then it was probably someone Peter put up to it, you know: Go on, John, ask him! The disciples had obviously had some kind of hushed conversation, a little huddle on the lakeshore to discuss Jesus' latest interaction with the crowds. What he had done was completely new. After hearing him preach the Sermon on the Mount, after hearing him teach the Lord's Prayer, after hearing him have bold, direct disagreements with the Pharisees, suddenly they hear their rabbi turn into a storyteller. Suddenly he is talking to the crowds in parables. Suddenly, his whole approach has changed, and the disciples want to know why. And so Peter, or Peter's proxy, asks the question. "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

Jesus, of course, has already hinted at the answer to this question. He has, in fact, hinted at it twice. The clue was in the very first word he spoke to the crowds, the very first thing he said to the people sitting in clusters on the beach: listen. Listen! he says, and then he begins to tell his parable. And then, in case anyone didn't hear it the first time, he says it again when the parable is finished: let anyone with ears listen. This is the clue, this is the answer the disciples are looking for. Why does he speak in parables? Because parables help people listen, and Jesus can see that the people need the help. He can see that the people

in the crowds before him have grown heavy of heart and hard of hearing. They cannot hear the Word of God, even though that Word is sitting right in front of them. But parables enable them to listen in a different way, to open themselves fully to truth, grace, and calling, to receive the Word of God with their ears and hold it in their hearts. The purpose of parables is to help with the problem of listening.

This first parable Jesus tells is also about the problem of listening. Look at the problems of the sower. His seed, which he flings about so profligately, finds itself in some distinctly unfertile places, places where there is no space, no soil, where there is no hope of its taking root. This seed, the Word of God, Jesus tells his disciples, finds no way to be truly heard. And where the Word of God goes unheard, there are few fruits of the spirit, only dust and wind.

The problems of listening in this parable are problems I'm guessing we've all encountered in our life of faith. The seed that falls along the path is like when we hear the Word of God but cannot comprehend its depth, when we do not understand what that Word demands of us, when we imagine discipleship to be so easy peasy light and breezy that we don't actually listen much at all. And so we are easily snatched away by things that are not God, and are lost to ourselves. The seed that falls on rocky ground is like when we hear the Word of God but only want to listen to the good things, the easy things, the convenient things, but then don't know what to do when we discover that the life of discipleship does not mean a life free from persecution or pain. And so we lose our grounding and are blown from the path. The seed that falls among thorns is like when we can hardly hear anything above the constant hum of our own worry, when our lives are choked by fear, when we are so desperate for control that we give in to that serpent hissing in our ears, telling us that we can get that control if only we get more stuff - more money, more power, more things. And so we are deafened by fear and greed and cannot discern the Word of God at all.

Listen. Listening is hard. Listening is demanding work. Listening is work. Listening requires energy and attention, intention and persistence. And listening is little rewarded as a practice, because listening is deeply and tragically countercultural in this world in which we live and move and have our social media accounts. It is far more fashionable to talk

or tweet, to post or pontificate as loudly as possible, than it is to stop, be still, and listen.

Now musicians know something about listening. The musicians who have been singing and conducting and playing this week know a great deal about the art of listening. They know that in order to do their jobs, in order to offer something beautiful and holy to the world, they need to work on the craft of listening. They know they need to practice, practice listening to everyone, in every place, at every single moment. They know that this kind of listening demands that they use their whole bodies, that they connect their ears to their breath to their hands to their hearts. They know that this kind of listening means that sometimes they must sing more softly, that the gift of their voice is worth nothing if it does not match and meld with the voices around them. They know that this kind of listening requires a leader who has the wisdom to hold them in their hands, a teacher who hears more than they can and who can weave their voices into one. And they know that this kind of listening, this true, humble, generous listening, has the power to utterly transform everything about their art, themselves, and the world.

What if I were to tell you that listening is a key, perhaps the key, to discipleship? What if I were to tell you that this community of Jesus followers we call the Church has passed down these parables from generation to generation because they knew just how important listening was, and because they knew how hard it was? The purpose of parables is to teach us to listen. Not to talk. Not to know all the answers, or pretend like we know all the answers. Not to always have the right thing to say, or to always say things that prove you're in the right, but to listen. Humbly. Openly. To God and to our neighbors.

Listening is a fundamental spiritual practice and one that is desperately needed in our cacophonous and increasingly cruel world. God longs for us to listen, humbly, for God's Word in every aspect of our lives, in every beat of every measure, not just for an hour on Sunday morning. God longs for us to listen, tenaciously, even when it's hard, even when what we're hearing is more dissonant, more painful, than we think we can bear. God longs for us to listen, deeply, for the thread of hope in anxious times, the line that helps us find our way when the world is dark and full of fear, that helps us let go of earthly things and hold fast to that which is good, that which is eternal, and beautiful, and true.

This kind of holy listening is the pearl of great price. It is the treasure hidden in the field. It is the good catch carefully preserved. This kind of holy listening is how we bear fruit in this world. Imagine a community of disciples who understood their primary calling was to be holy listeners. Imagine a Church whose mission statement was only: We listen. Imagine a crowd of people whose great joy of listening was able to meet the great need of their neighbors to just be heard, just as they are. Imagine the fruit that kind of listening would bear – blessings thirty, sixty, a hundredfold. Imagine the power that community would have to offer hope and peace and healing to a world that desperately needs all three.

Beloved. Listen. Listen! Let go and know that God is speaking in this holy place, that God is speaking in these prayers and in these hymns, in these anthems and in these breaths. And know that God will be speaking when you leave this place, in the words you hear from your neighbor in your pew, as you turn on the news in your car, as you sit together as a family over lunch, as you wait in the airport or drive a hundred miles, as you play and as you sleep, as you rise and go to school, as you shop and as you serve, as you hear something that fills you with joy, as you hear something that fills you with pain, as you work and study and love and sing and play and laugh and weep and fall down and get back up and reach out and tear down walls and fail and try again and love and love and love and love. God is always speaking to you, always pouring out words of grace into the world, showering you with mercy and justice and truth and love. Even in the darkness, even in the desert, even when you are filled with unanswerable questions, even when you feel like the moral arc of the universe is bending backwards over itself, even when your heart is breaking, even when your soul is weary, even when you don't feel worthy, even, especially in these hard times, God is speaking. Listen. Shhhh. Listen louder. The Word of God is very near you. Let anyone, let everyone, with ears listen.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.